

Churchill, Sir Winston (statesman)

Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill held most of the high offices of state in Great Britain, was a member of Parliament for more than 60 years, and served twice as prime minister. As Britain's leader through most of WORLD WAR II, he personified resistance to tyranny.

Early Life

Winston Churchill was born at Blenheim Palace on Nov. 30, 1874. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill, was the third son of the 7th duke of Marlborough, and Winston was thus directly descended from the 1st duke of MARLBOROUGH, of whom he was to write a monumental biography. His mother was Jennie Jerome, an American. Churchill's childhood was unhappy. He loathed most of his time at school (Harrow) and obstinately refused to learn any Greek beyond the alphabet. He loved to read history and poetry, however, and was fascinated by soldiers and battles. From childhood he had an extraordinary memory.

Declining the suggestion that he might go to a university, Churchill enrolled in the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. He graduated in 1894 and was commissioned in the 4th Hussars. After service in Cuba and India, he took part in the Battle of Omdurman (1898) in the Sudan and published an account of it in *The River War* (2 vols., 1899). He had already written for British newspapers while on military duty. Sent to cover the SOUTH AFRICAN WAR for the *Morning Post*, he was captured by the Boers in 1899. His daring escape made him an overnight celebrity.

Liberal Statesman

Churchill was already set in the ambition to become a politician. He was elected to Parliament as a Conservative in 1900 and, although he found speaking an ordeal, quickly made his mark. His political sympathies began to change, however, and he abandoned the Conservative party for the Liberals in 1904.

When the Liberals came to power in 1905, Churchill entered the government as under secretary of state for the colonies. In 1908, the year of his marriage to Clementine Hosier, he became a member of the cabinet as president of the Board of Trade; in 1910 he was appointed home secretary and in the following year first lord of the Admiralty. Even in Herbert ASQUITH's cabinet of high ability, Churchill stood out as a coming man. Working closely with Admiral Lord FISHER OF KILVERSTONE, who was largely responsible for the modernization of the Royal Navy, Churchill completed British naval preparations for war.

After World War I began, he attempted to exploit the navy's mobility in forcing (1915) the Dardanelles (see GALLIPOLC CAMPAIGN). This audacious assault failed, and when the Conservatives, many of whom now detested him, joined the government in 1915, Churchill was moved from the Admiralty. After a period of active military service in France, he became (1917) minister of munitions under David LLOYD GEORGE. He subsequently served as secretary of state for war and air (1918-21) and for the colonies (1921-22) and helped negotiate the treaty (1921) that created the Irish Free State. But he lost both his office and his seat in Parliament when Lloyd George's coalition government fell in 1922.

Conservative Chancellor and Critic

Over the next year or two, Churchill gradually moved back into alliance with the Conservatives. He used to remark with a mischievous twinkle, "Any fool can rat, but I flatter myself that it takes a certain ingenuity to re-rat." Returned to Parliament in 1924, he was offered the post of chancellor of the exchequer in Stanley BALDWIN's Conservative government (1924-29). The measure with which he is chiefly identified at the exchequer was the return to the gold standard, giving the pound a fixed value against other currencies, in 1925. Churchill took this step with many misgivings, and it proved a mistake, worsening the already poor economic situation. During the General Strike of 1926, Churchill was vehement in his condemnation of the strikers. Afterward he made efforts to heal the breach with labor, but he was never entirely successful.

Between 1929 and 1939 Churchill did not hold office. He disapproved violently of Baldwin's Indian policy, which pointed toward eventual self-government. At the same time he warned against the ambitions of Nazi Germany and urged that Britain should match Germany in air power. As World War II drew nearer, his warnings were seen to be justified.

When general war broke out in September 1939, Churchill was offered his old post of first lord of the Admiralty by

Prime Minister Neville CHAMBERLAIN. Following the abortive Allied attempt to dislodge the Germans from Norway, for which Churchill bore considerable responsibility, Chamberlain determined to resign. Churchill replaced him as prime minister as Germany invaded the Low Countries on May 10, 1940.

War Leader

The prime minister was largely responsible for many aspects of war policy. He established personal relations of the highest value with U.S. President Franklin D. ROOSEVELT, who began to supply arms to Britain immediately after the British army lost most of its equipment at DUNKERQUE (June 1940). In the late summer of 1940, as the Battle of Britain (see BRITAIN, BATTLE OF) raged overhead and no one knew whether Britain would be invaded, Churchill daringly diverted an armored division—one of only two in Britain—to the Middle East. Although no one had been a more convinced opponent of the USSR, he decided immediately to give help to the USSR when it was invaded by Germany in the summer of 1941. The entry of the United States into the war at the end of the same year gave the Allies the advantage in greater resources.

The new shape of the alliance also meant that Britain's influence was bound to diminish as the USSR and the United States developed their full power. Churchill, however, was determined that the slaughter that he had seen in World War I should not be repeated. Accordingly, he refused to attempt an invasion of mainland Europe until North Africa and the Mediterranean had been cleared of the enemy. The Allied invasion of Sicily and Italy, "the soft underbelly of the Axis," finally began in the summer of 1943, to be followed a year later by the NORMANDY INVASION.

By this time, however, Churchill carried less weight at conferences and in the general formation of war strategy. For example, in the final stages of the war he favored a fast Western Allied drive on Berlin to forestall Soviet occupation but was overruled by the Allied commander in chief Dwight EISENHOWER, who wanted to crush the last German resistance in the West. It is not certain, however, that further penetration by British and American forces into Europe would have held the Soviets at bay. Moreover, Churchill did not then foresee the full Soviet threat. At the time of the YALTA CONFERENCE (February 1945), when substantial concessions were made to the USSR, Churchill spoke in terms of high confidence about Soviet intentions. He soon came to a different opinion, and in 1946, in a speech delivered in Fulton, Mo., he spoke of the "iron curtain" that had descended across Europe.

Although Churchill wished to keep the wartime coalition government in being, a general election was called in Britain in July 1945. Then, after the unconditional surrender of Germany and just before the final collapse of Japan, the British electorate voted the Conservatives out. When the first results were received, showing a substantial swing to the Labour party, Churchill was taking a bath. He remarked: "There may well be a landslide and they have a perfect right to kick us out. That is democracy. That is what we have been fighting for. Hand me my towel."

Later Years

Labour accordingly took office with a large majority. Churchill felt deeply this rejection by the electorate and determined to reverse it. By the end of 1951 he was back in power, with a small majority. Although he never quite matched in this last phase as prime minister the performance of his wartime days, his energy in the first year or two remained astonishing. Churchill gave authority to the administration; his very presence as prime minister helped to still criticism.

In July 1953, soon after his knighthood and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, he suffered a stroke. Sir Anthony EDEN, whom Churchill had long wanted as his successor, was himself ill at the time, and part of Churchill's motive in remaining in office was doubtless to ensure that Eden was not cheated of his succession. Churchill finally left office in April 1955.

Sir Winston's last ten years, marked by an increasing feebleness in health, were occupied by occasional travel, a little painting, and the publication of his History of the English Speaking Peoples (4 vols., 1956-58). This was the last of his many notable writings, which included Lord Randolph Churchill (1906), The World Crisis (4 vols., 1923-29), My Early Life (1930), Marlborough (4 vols., 1933-38), and The Second World War (6 vols., 1948-54). He was awarded the NOBEL PRIZE in literature in 1953. Churchill occupied to the end a special place in the affections of the British people, symbolizing a magnificent national performance in heroic days. He died on Jan. 24, 1965, 70 years to the day after his father, at the age of 90.

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